

HEALTH

Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine: What a Parent Needs to Know

What is pneumococcal disease?

Pneumococcal disease is the main cause of bacterial meningitis (an infection of the covering of the brain) in the United States. Each year, pneumococcal disease causes many health problems in children younger than 5 years, including:

- More than 700 cases of meningitis
- About 17,000 blood infections
- About 5 million ear infections

Children younger than 2 years are at highest risk for serious disease. Pneumococcal disease causes about 200 deaths each year in children younger than 5 years.

What is the pneumococcal vaccine?

Pneumococcal conjugate vaccine is a "shot" for infants and toddlers. It is good at preventing pneumococcal disease, and it also helps stop the disease from spreading from person to person.

The vaccine's protection lasts at least 3 years. Because most serious pneumococcal infections happen during the first 2 years of life, the vaccine protects children when they are at greatest risk. (Some older children and adults may get a different vaccine called pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine.)

Who should get the pneumococcal conjugate vaccine and when?

1. Children younger than 2 years. All healthy infants and toddlers should get 4 doses of pneumococcal conjugate vaccine.
2. Children between 2 and 5 years of age. Pneumococcal conjugate vaccine is recommended for children between 2 and 5 years of age who:
 - Have sickle cell disease
 - Have a damaged spleen or no spleen
 - Have HIV/AIDS
 - Have other diseases that affect the immune system, such as diabetes or cancer
 - Take medicines that affect the immune system, such as chemotherapy or steroids
 - Are Alaska natives, Native Americans or Blacks
 - Attend group child care

The number of doses needed depends on the age when the vaccination begins. Ask your doctor for more details.

